JOHN BOYD: BIRTHDAY REMARKS

What does one say on one's 100th birthday? One thing, apparently, is to let people know how you got this far. Because so often I'm asked: to what do you owe your longevity?

Well, I have to admit that much of it must be in the genes. My maternal grandfather lived to age 83, after being laid up for 25 years with rheumatoid arthritis. And I'm told he had a great-grandmother who lived to 115.

My father came to Canada in 1906, with a cousin who lived most of her life in Winnipeg and died several years ago, just two months short of 109. But I understand that genes don't count for much, if you're hit by a truck.

There may be yet another factor. I have a cousin in Surrey, BC, who is 99. Apparently soon after she was born her mother became ill, so my mother, while breast-feeding me, also breast-fed her. As a result, I was breast-fed for 18 months. They don't do that anymore, do they?

Recently, on the Internet I found a much more practical suggestion for how to live to 100 and beyond. It's very simple. Just two words: *keep breathing*.

One hundred years! So many memories. Memories of joy and sorrow, of success and failure, of pride and regret.

There's so much I could say about my long life, but I've decided to briefly touch on just four aspects:

(1) the life-long dream or vision I've had that is still unfulfilled, (2) the phenomenal changes I 've lived through, the extraordinary sights I've seen and the historic events I have witnessed. (3) my greatest regret and (4) the loves, companions and friendships that have filled my life.

From my childhood, I've been keenly aware of the poverty and injustice in the world and in later years dreamed of, hoped for and advocated a more just, more equitable society.

One that the early socialists of 200 years ago in England, France and Germany proposed: a society based on the principle "from each according to his or her ability; to each according to his or her need." A society in which talent and skill would be suitably rewarded, but also one in which no one would have to go hungry or live without shelter.

Regrettably, the efforts of millions of men and women of good will through all the decades and centuries to achieve such a society were hijacked, misdirected or betrayed and nowhere to this day has such a society been achieved.

So we still have a world in which the rich continue to get richer, the middle class is dwindling and more and more people live in poverty.

More recently, the rich have managed, with some success, to sell us on the idea that it is they and their corporations that keep society functioning and are the key to its future success.

Well, they're wrong. Very wrong. It's not they who keep our society going.

It's the labourers and construction workers, the miners and loggers, the doctors, nurses and care-givers, the scientists, teachers and research workers, the cooks, waiters and dishwashers, the firefighters and traffic cops, the air pilots and flight attendants, the farmers and small merchants, the factory and office workers, the computer operators.

Without these, the corporate owners and their managers, who keep getting multi-million dollar bonuses, wouldn't last 24 hours.

But I'm an optimist. I believe that one day the people *will* build a more just, more equitable world. It won't be in the way those of my generation thought it would be done -- and it may take another generation or two -- but eventually it will be achieved.

In the early 1900s, Ralph Chaplin, the American labour poet, wrote a poem that was turned into a song the people of that period sang to the tune of "Nellie Gray." It ended with this chorus:

But we have a glowing dream of how fair this world will seem,
When each man can live his life secure and free.
When the earth is owned by labour and there's joy and peace for all,
In the commonwealth of toil that is to be.

The world, of course, has changed greatly in the past 100 years and continues to change. Indeed, scientists say that today new knowledge doubles every 18 months, where it used to double every 10 years or every 100 years. And it will change even more rapidly. But I feel very fortunate to have witnessed many of the changes that have taken place.

In 1926, at the age of 13, I built a radio "crystal set." For less than one dollar, I bought a holder for the crystal, a little copper wire and two metal terminals, which I mounted on a piece of pine board.

For $2.50, a substantial amount in those days, which my mother gave me without my father knowing about it, I bought a set of ear phones and began searching the air waves. We lived in the Niagara area then and one day I excitedly said, "Ma, I got Buffalo." You couldn't get Toronto because it was across the lake.

I dreamed of building a one-tube set, then a two-tube set, and eventually perhaps the 8-tube super-heterodyne. But the discovery of the transistor soon after changed all that.

At the age of 14, I collected butterflies, moths and a variety of insects, which I chloroformed and mounted on cotton batting in three display boxes with glass tops that I built myself. It all whetted my interest in science and led me to become an avid reader of the *Popular Mechanics* magazine. How different from what kids read and do today!

At the age of 15, I saw the first coloured movie, "The Black Pirate," starring Douglas Fairbanks Sr. The price of admission, by the way, was six cents. It was still a silent film, like all the others I saw at the time, films starring actors like Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Pola Negri, Mary Pickford, Greta Garbo and Harold Lloyd. The following year, I saw my first "talking picture": Al Jolson in "The Jazz Singer."

In the late 1920s, and during the 1930s, I saw the introduction of indoor toilets and bath-tubs, electric washing machines and wringers, the electric iron, the typewriter, the linotype, which is now obsolete, cars you didn't have to crank to start and that were totally enclosed with glass windows, the portable and electric typewriter, the dial phone...

Then came the miracle of television. Later, of course, came the computer, the cell phone and countless other electronic devices.

I feel so lucky to have seen the start of them all. And lucky to still be able to use some of them.

A few years ago, because of my failing vision, I acquired ZoomText software for my computer, which enlarges the images and type. Without it, I wouldn't be able to use the computer at all. More recently, I have also acquired Dragon software, with which you speak into a microphone to produce text instead of using the keyboard.

Now that I'm reaching 100 and am almost blind, the big question is: for how long?

Although, as I said earlier, I stopped playing the mandolin at 17, in later years, I continued to be very much involved in music and the performing arts. In 1946, at the beginning of the Cold War, a delegation of Soviet performing artists, including the renowned violinist Leonid Kogan, was invited to Canada and performed in a dozen cities, from Montreal to Vancouver. I had the privilege of accompanying them on the entire tour and was m.c. at each of the concerts.

I year later, I was part of an ad hoc impresario committee that for the first time brought the renowned Russian cellist, Mstislav Rostropovich, to give a performance in what then still existed in Toronto, the Eaton Auditorium. Later, I also participated in bringing Paul Robeson to Toronto to give his two final concerts in Massey Hall.

In the 1960s, I recall listening to Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong, the talented, gravel-voiced American musician, sing "What A Wonderful World." At the time, I thought: how, in the midst of all the poverty and injustice, could anyone really say it's a wonderful world?

As I got older, though, I realized that the poverty and injustice were caused by the humans themselves, that the world itself is truly wonderful.

And I am fortunate to have seen so much of it. Most of Canada, of course – from Vancouver Island to Tuktoyaktuk at the Arctic Circle to Signal Hill in Newfoundland and much of the country in between – by plane, by car and by train, including two trips by freight train , "riding the rods" as they used to say, at the age of 17.

I have been to most of Canada's cities, have seen most of its larger lakes and rivers (and fished on several of them). In the U.S., I've driven along the Pacific coast, visited Chicago, Pennsylvania and Florida. Never got to see New York City, though, but that's another story. And now I guess I never will.

I've seen many of the great cities of Europe. Visited Mexico and Cuba. Traveled across Siberia and Outer Mongolia, saw Beijing and the Great Wall of China. So I can say, yes, it *is* a wonderful world!

I do have to mention two major changes that fundamentally affected my life.

In 1930, during the Great Depression, at the age of 17, I left school near the end of Grade 11 to attend a left-wing leadership course, after which, for almost four decades, I was a full-time functionary in the Canadian communist movement, mostly as an editor.

In 1967, I went with my wife Gladys to Prague, the capital of what was then Czechoslovakia – and, by the way, one of the most beautiful cities in the world -- to serve for two years on the editorial board of an international Communist magazine. There I witnessed the start of the hopeful and exciting reform movement for "socialism with a human face" that evolved in that country at the time.

But I also saw how it was brutally crushed by the Soviet armed forces.

Over the preceding years, I had been disappointed and disillusioned by many of the actions of the Soviet regime but this for me was the "last straw." I quit the Communist Party and became an editor in the health care field.

We all have periods of happiness and sadness in our lives. We also have regrets. My greatest regret is that I did not spend more time with my family.

Like the busy company executive, the zealous missionary, the dedicated research worker or the ambitious politician, I spent many of my days and nights – *and* many weekends –

working for a cause and therefore not spending as much time as I should have with my family. Ours was a loving and happy family and I did my best to provide for them. For example, because I always loved working with tools, for two decades – the 40s & 50s -- in my spare hours, I renovated, upgraded and resold three houses, to provide the family with a more comfortable home. Regrettably, that is not the same as spending more quality time with them. But you find that out too late.

The most rewarding part of my life, of course, has been the love I've shared with my family and my friends. Much of it with loved ones who are no longer with us.

At the top of the list, of course, is my dear Gladys, my love, my friend and companion of 52 years. Gladys, with her laughing eyes, her generous heart and ever friendly disposition.

Next, of course, is the love I've received from my children. From my first-born, my unbelievably wise, understanding, ever-loving and ever-respectful daughter Bonnie. Born on the day after my birthday, unfortunately, the celebration of hers was always overshadowed by mine. But next Sunday, right after my birthday, she'll hit the big Seven O. So I wish her well, as I do every day of my life. From Bonnie's lifelong mate, Norman Wilson, with his ever friendly smile and his open, generous Irish heart.

Then there's the love I had for 58 years from my modest, thoughtful, musically supremely gifted son Kim, who left this world far too soon. And from Kim's dear love, the caring, capable and conscientious Diane Mossman, from their son, my dear grandson, Sean, and his two little daughters, my great-granddaughters, Isabella and Jasmin.

From my tender-loving, bright, multi-talented and independent-thinking son, Zane, who has taught me so much about attitude to life and the world.

From Gladys's sister, Helen Weir, who through all her life was "Nana" to my children and whose two children, Chuck and Lorna, were always an integral part of our family.

From my quiet, unassuming, highly talented and capable, ever- sensitive and ever-sensible sister, Natalie, and her respectful and highly respected, and widely acclaimed husband of more than six decades, Paul Siren.

From my life-loving brother Ronny, with his outstanding voice and acting ability, his generous heart, his ever-friendly smile and his infectious sense of humour.
From my bright, talented, care-free younger brother Terry, who also left this world too soon.

And from my great galaxy of nieces and nephews and grand-nieces and grand-nephews – many of whom are here tonight – most of whom, regrettably, I no longer have the time or energy to see and keep in touch with as often as I'd like.

I am fortunate also to have been able to share -- all too briefly -- the love and companionship of three remarkable women:

Billie Bridgman, of Guelph, the unbelievably knowledgeable lover of nature, with whom I had the pleasure of traveling to the West Coast of Canada and the U.S. and visit several cities in Europe. Billie is now in her late 90s and, I'm glad to note, is with us here tonight.

There was also the late Jean Melbye, the very capable and passionate community activist and builder of housing co-operatives, with whom I lived happily for three years until she was suddenly stricken by a fatal illness.

Through all the years since, however, I have enjoyed the love and respect of Jean's daughter Cara and her two sons, Jesse and Ben, who always remind me of those few wonderful years.

Ben, by the way, is a professional DJ and kindly volunteered to provide the music for this evening. Jesse is the general manager of the prestigious Ruth Chris's steakhouse and, along with my grandson Sean, was very much involved in organizing and providing the catering for this party.

For the past decade or so, at this late stage in my life, believe it or not, I have also been enjoying the friendship and companionship of yet another remarkable woman, Dorothy Bloch, of Montreal, a wise, caring and compassionate retired social worker. Since it's a long-distance relationship, most of it is, of course, anticipation. There is also the fact that she is only 85, but fortunately we're both quite comfortable with the age gap.

Finally, I must tell you how happy I am to still be able to enjoy the love and respect of so many friends, including all of you here tonight. I want you to know that you all bring back many memories, that you're all very dear to me and that I am most grateful to you for coming to pay me this tribute. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart. Thank you, thank you.